

Veterans Court to provide special training for court personnel and an on-site resource coordinator to help advise veterans

Islip NY— On Monday, Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) joined with Hon. Judy Harris Kluger, Chief of Policy and Planning, New York State Courts and Suffolk County District Administrative Judge H. Patrick Leis III to dedicate Suffolk County's new Veterans Court along with Phillip Moschitta, Director Northport VA Medical Center.



The Veterans Court is a judicially supervised treatment court that balances the need to hold people accountable for their actions with the need to treat veterans who may be suffering from a substance abuse and/or mental health disorder. Veterans Courts give veterans facing criminal charges on-site support and access to services they might need, such as PTSD or substance abuse counseling. Judges and court staff will receive specialized training on resources available for veterans and the VA will provide an on-site "Resource Coordinator" to assist both the veteran and court personnel.

"This court opening comes at a critical time as many thousands of veterans are returning each year to civilian life in this country. The Suffolk County veterans' court will enhance the way the justice system responds to veterans struggling with substance abuse or mental health issues. I am grateful to Congressman Steve Israel and to Director Phillip Moschitta and the staff of the Northport Veterans Affairs Medical Center for their support and collaborative efforts. With their involvement and the dedication of Administrative Judge H. Patrick Leis III and Judge John Toomey, we look forward to the great success of this new problem-solving court," said Hon. Judy Harris Kluger, Chief of Policy and Planning for the New York State Unified Court System.

Rep. Israel said, "Our veterans sacrifice in the service of our nation and too often that means experiencing the horrors of war. Sadly, some return home and struggle with problems like PTSD or substance abuse, sometimes leading to the court system. Veterans Courts are a way to give those who served us the chance to get better. We should provide our veterans with on-site resources so that we aren't simply addressing the symptoms of the problem, but also the causes by directing them to the specialized services of the VA. I'm proud to have worked with Judge Patrick Leis and the Northport VAMC to bring a Veterans Court to Suffolk County."

Eric Bruno, Northport's Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator, said, "Since treatment has proven successful in reducing veterans' contacts with the legal system and potential homelessness, we at Northport VA are pleased to be partnering with the Suffolk County Second District Court and Congressman Israel to provide viable alternatives to incarceration."

Many veterans returning home from combat find it challenging to assimilate back into civilian life. Nearly a quarter of New York veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from symptoms of PTSD or major depression. Additionally, New York veterans face a 13% unemployment rate which is significantly higher than the 8.2% rate for New York civilians.

Often untreated mentally ill veterans are arrested for minor criminal acts that are manifestations of their illness. The current system of conviction and sentencing leaves underlying problems unresolved and enables a pattern of recidivism. It can lead to prolonged suffering as well as other problems like homelessness.

To deal with these issues Judge Leis and Congressman Israel gathered a group of interested parties to discuss forming a Veterans Court. The first meeting was held June 25, 2010 at the Suffolk County Administrative Judge's Office in Central Islip, with Congressman Israel, Judge Patrick Leis, and other officials. Over the last several months of 2010 details were hashed out on how a Veterans' Court could be implemented in Suffolk County and what veterans would be able to utilize the court (non-violent offenders, DWI's, etc.).

In conjunction with the Northport VA, the Veterans Court, the judge and staff will have specialized training and specific understanding of resources available to veterans provided at the VA. The VA will also assign a Court Liaison, called a "Resource Coordinator," to act as an advisor to the court. The DA will screen cases to determine whether they can be heard in the Veterans Court. Certain offenses will not be seen, such as sex offences and violent crimes.

Congressman Israel sent a letter to Veterans Administration Secretary Eric Shinseki asking him to look at Veterans Courts like the one being set up in Suffolk County as a model for the rest of the country and to have the VA work with local court systems in the way that the Northport VA has worked closely with the Suffolk County to set up this court system.

President Obama has announced a coordinated and comprehensive Federal Government level approach to supporting military families. The Veterans Court concept is part of the initiative and will be expanded to other states across the US. The DOJ, HHS, and VA have partnered to further develop the Veterans Treatment Court concept. A Veterans Drug Court Planning Initiative will be held in 2011 to train 10 teams from various cities on how to coordinate services for veterans suffering from substance abuse.

The first Veterans Court was established in Buffalo, New York in 2008. Buffalo's Veterans Court cites a zero recidivism rate (i.e. none of the participants have been rearrested and returned).